Moving Forward: Key Areas of Educational Research for the Asia Pacific

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This paper aims to discuss the unique context of education systems among the top-performing educational systems in Asia and propose key research areas which would be relevant to the Asia-Pacific. The short paper begins by highlighting changes in the twenty first century landscape, charts prospective research directions, and concludes by elaborating and emphasizing research related to (a) charting twenty first century learning and its dispositions, (b) lower achieving students, and (c) teacher professionalism.

In 2007 and 2010, McKinsey and Company evaluated education systems worldwide and identified key factors for success and future advancements. The 2010 McKinsey Report focused on how the world's twenty most improved school systems keep getting better. Top-performing systems from Asia include Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea. Insights generated suggest that although the dominant philosophies of education stem from key theorists such as Dewey (1916/2009) and Piaget (1974), many Asian systems have educational histories and philosophies that differ from Western traditions.

Understanding of learning in the twenty first century go beyond conceptual and academic framings to include considerations of dispositions and values, and framings which heed the importance of life-long learning. Going forward,

Asian education systems need to continue to maintain their excellent academic standards while infusing orientations of learning which emphasize innovation, creativity, exploration, and play. As a recognition that learning occurs in formal and informal contexts, it is important to develop other talents and dispositions in informal contexts instead of primarily focusing on academic outcomes in formal contexts (Hung et al. 2012). It is our considered expectation that as the practices and contexts of learning are expanded to enable informal learning principles to be enacted, achievement gaps between high and lower achieving students can be mediated as systems move toward more inclusive education.

Key Research Foci

We have attempted to study various levels of the education system and the ecologies of learning and education (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Key research foci that have been identified are as follows:

1. Charting twenty first century learning and its dispositions, for example, adaptivity, self- and other-regulation, collaboration, critical literacies, and leadership traits;
2. Leveling up the base or bridging the achieving gap for low achievers with a view to inclusive education;
3. Recognizing a greater diversity of talents by extending understanding of learning spaces (both formal and informal);
4. Understanding teacher professionalism with respect to other professions and Communities of Practice;
5. Designing for authentic learning and learner-centric environments by embracing new media and new cultures of learning;

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6. Understanding the socio-cultural contexts of the Asia-Pacific, how some systems excel, and the possible existence of an East-Asian pedagogy; and

7. Studying all levels of the education system so as to understand the ecologies of learning and education, both within and across systems.

From the list mentioned above, three foci areas particularly stand out as needful and of higher priority. We will elaborate on these areas below.

Charting Twenty First Century Learning and its Dispositions

Generally, top-performing Asian systems such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea have societal and cultural expectations imposed by families to do well in examinations. There are possible dangers of overemphasizing the academics and neglecting twenty first century literacies and its dispositions—such as creativity, and adaptivity. Thus, research ought to be commissioned in ways to chart and recognize the development and practice of these value-oriented dispositions in and out of schools (for example, National Research Council 2010; Nitko and Brookhart 2011).

Lower Achieving Students

Our studies in Singapore have identified that students, especially lower achievers, can excel if the criteria of school-based performance are extended to recognize other non-traditional talents (Crawford 2002). Indeed, many twenty first century literacies are exercised in students' expressions in the arts, sports, music, and esthetics. Lower achieving students also seem to perform better if varied pedagogies are adopted in the dialogic co-construction of meaning through multiple representations (Kapur 2008; Bielaczyc 2006). There is an urgent need to know how—as a system—we can narrow gaps between high and lower achievers through means such as:

- strengthening students' foundational literacies earlier on in their K-12 learning trajectory;
- customizing teaching and learning strategies to better suit lower achieving students' needs; and
- bridging learning in formal and informal spaces to broaden opportunities for contextualized learning.

Teacher Professionalism

As we analyze the system as a whole from macro to micro perspectives, we have begun to recognize that teacher professionalism plays a key role in enabling learner-centric designs. Teachers need to develop capacities to design authentic learning experiences that focus on the processes of learning, meaning-making, inquiry, as well as those which use technology to enable first-person learning experiences. In this regard, further research efforts relating to teacher quality, teacher professionalism and Communities of Practice, school leadership and support, and policy translations are needed. It is essential to understand the socio-cultural contexts of education systems and recognize that historic, political, and cultural dimensions impact learning practices and transformations. Comparative work across systems would thus be useful with the view that systems can learn from each other. We argue that learning in the twenty first century would benefit from more holistic perspectives; in this sense, Asian systems could learn from their Western counterparts with regard to the complementing of traditional notions of academic excellence with process- or formative-orientations of learning.

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